



Office of the Mayor

NEWS RELEASE

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Mayor Luecke, Firefighters Salute Chief Luther Taylor

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From being a tillerman responsible for steering the rear of a ladder truck to implementing changes that brought the South Bend Fire Department into the 21st century as one of Indiana's best-regarded fire programs, Chief Luther J. Taylor Sr. has given his best.

Taylor, the longest serving fire chief in South Bend's history, officially retires April 16 after 34 years and 6 months of service, including the last 21 years as chief.

"Chief Taylor made the city a better place and certainly made the fire department a better place," said Mayor Stephen J. Luecke. "During his tenure, Chief Taylor has provided strong leadership, upgrading equipment, facilities and training. He has made this department one of the premiere forces in the state of Indiana and the nation."

The Central Fire Station, 1222 S. Michigan St., was one of four major facilities built during Taylor's tenure along with Fire Station No. 10 in 1999 at 5303 York Road, and Fire Station No. 2, which is expected to be completed in July and 402 Dr. Martin Luther King Drive (at Lincolnway West). (He also oversaw the renovation of Fire Station No. 7, 616 Portage Ave., and the construction of a nine-bay storage facility.)

Taylor, named South Bend's first African-American fire chief on Oct. 25, 1985, has served under three mayors and with five police chiefs. During his tenure, the South Bend Fire Department grew from 211 to 248 sworn firefighters. Taylor has personally recommended the promotion of 21 chiefs, while overseeing an annual budget of \$23 million.

Taylor's work at firefighter training, facilities improvement and special operations made him a natural choice when Gov. Joe Kernan needed an executive director for the State Emergency Management Agency in 2004. Taylor took a leave of absence to serve from April through December of 2004.

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“You represented the city well and helped make the state a better place,” Luecke told Taylor.

In an era when the work of firefighters changed dramatically, Taylor led the department by:

- Creating a state-certified hazardous materials response team, which he served as its first coordinator.
- Establishing special-operations units, including for river rescue, tactical rescue, confined spaces rescue and trench/structural collapse rescue.
- Expanding Emergency Medical Service operations countywide in 1997, increasing South Bend’s ambulances from two to seven and ensuring that all South Bend personnel were certified at least as EMTs.
- Instituting a mandatory annual physical for all firefighters.
- Implementing a five-year vehicle-replacement program.
- Installing automated external defibrillators on all first-response vehicles as well as in other key locations citywide.
- Seeing the department’s overall equipment rating rise from poor to excellent.
- Negotiating an agreement in 1999 for South Bend firefighters to staff the neonatal ambulance based at Memorial Hospital.

“I’m most proud of the safety we have been able to accomplish for firefighters doing their job,” said Taylor, whose department is outfitted in state-of-the-art gear.

He also moved to computerize the 11 fire stations, expanded the arson investigation bureau to include a police officer, changed dress uniforms to white shirts, negotiated EMS agreements with the University of Notre Dame and created new battalion chiefs for EMS and Special Operations.

Taylor began as a firefighter Oct. 16, 1972, initially only thinking to serve a year or so before returning to work he enjoyed as a machinist. “It was never my intent to stay that long but I guess it was meant to be,” Taylor said. “I admired how much the late Capt. Don Howell and Capt. Jack Reed (at that time) enjoyed being firefighters.”

In January 1976, Taylor was named captain on an engine company, a role in which he supervised personnel at fire scenes and was responsible for company training. Four years later, he was named battalion chief of fire suppression, supervising more than 30 firefighters and overseeing companies and daily shift activities. It was during this time, he implemented the haz-mat team, serving as its first coordinator until he was named fire chief in October 1985 by Mayor Roger Parent.

Taylor’s more than 20 awards include being named an Indiana Sagamore of the Wabash by Gov. Kernan, receiving a distinguished leadership award from the South Bend/Mishawaka Leadership Alumni Association, and getting outstanding citizen awards from the Solidarity Day Committee, the Scottish Rite of Freemasonry and the Amvets Post No. 66.

At age 60, some 10 years away from mandatory retirement, the lean and soft-spoken, 6-foot-4 Taylor is in great health.

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He was born in Jackson, Tenn. Taylor and his wife, Gwen, have one son, Luther Jr., one daughter, Jenice, and five grandchildren. They are members of Macedonia Missionary Baptist Church, which Taylor serves as a deacon and as director of its finance committee.

“I look forward to doing some volunteer work,” he said.

As he prepares to end his assignment, Taylor has been leading an effort to build a regional fire safety training facility on 50 acres near the South Bend Regional Airport. The facility could also serve as a homeland security training center for all of the seven-county Region 2, including St. Joseph, Elkhart, Fulton, Kosciusko, Marshall, Pulaski and Starke counties.

“I trust that my leadership in public safety during those 21½ years has made a difference in our community,” Taylor said. “I can proudly say I gave it my best.”